COUNTWAY LIBRARY
HC 4WHJ F

BOSTON
MEDICAL
LIBRARY
1
Ea
853

BOSTON
MEDICAL LIBRARY
8 THE FENWAY

Digitized by the Internet Archive
in 2025

https://archive.org/details/drbenjamingottfa0012hora

DR. BENJAMIN GOTT

A FAMILY OF DOCTORS

BY

HORACE DAVIS

REPRINTED FROM

THE PUBLICATIONS

OF

The Colonial Society of Massachusetts

VOL. XII

CAMBRIDGE

JOHN WILSON AND SON

University Press

1909

1 Ga 853

DR. BENJAMIN GOTT

A FAMILY OF DOCTORS

DR. BENJAMIN GOTT: A FAMILY OF DOCTORS.

Dr. Benjamin Gott was a physician of some prominence in Marlboro, Massachusetts, in the middle of the eighteenth century. His father, John Gott, a well-to-do tanner of Wenham, had three sons; the elder two he intended should continue his business, while Benjamin, the youngest, was indentured to Dr. Samuel Wallis of Ipswich to learn the "art and mysteries" of the physician's profession. Benjamin was born March 13, 1705–06, and was probably about thirteen or fourteen years old at the beginning of his apprenticeship. His father died in 1722 during his indenture, and in his will charged his elder sons to "find him with good and sufficient clothing during the time he is to live with Dr. Wallis as may appear by his indenture" and "pay him £200 in silver money or in good bills of credit when he arrives at the age of twenty-one years."

Here I lose sight of the boy for six years. He probably finished his term with Dr. Wallis, received his two hundred pounds, moved west to Marlboro, which even in 1727 was well out towards the wilderness, and started in the practice of medicine.

On January 20, 1728, being only twenty-two, he married Sarah, daughter of the Rev. Robert Breck of Marlboro. She was only sixteen or seventeen years old, when this young couple launched out into life on their own account. The Rev. Robert Breck, a descendant of Edward Breck of Dorchester, graduated from Harvard College in 1700 and was a clergyman of some note in his day. His wife, Elizabeth, was the daughter of Simon Wainwright of Haverhill, who was killed by Indians in 1708. These Wainwrights form a remarkable family distinguished for their wealth, their military spirit, and the extraordinary number of their college-bred men.

Three years later, on January 6, 1731, the Rev. Mr. Breck died leaving to Dr. Gott "two acres of land as recompense for instructing my son Robert in the rules of physic." This Robert Breck, Junior, born July 25, 1713, graduated at Harvard College in 1730, preached in Springfield in 1734, was ordained on January 26, 1736, and was settled over the Springfield parish where he gained considerable distinction as a preacher. It does not appear that he ever practised medicine as a profession, but it was not uncommon in those early

days for a minister to acquire some technical knowledge of the healing art, so that he could care for the bodily ailments of his people, as well as their spiritual needs, in case his field of work fell in one of the small outlying towns, just as the missionaries in China to-day are often practising physicians.

The Rev. Mr. Breck's will also left to Dr. Gott "ten pounds worth of books out of my library," which will account for the large number of theological works in the inventory of Dr. Gott's library.[1]

It is worthy of note here that a younger son of Mr. Breck, Samuel, born May 17, 1723, graduated at Harvard College in 1742, also studied medicine, perhaps with Dr. Gott, and settled in Worcester in 1743, in the practice of his profession. Dr. Gott's oldest son Benjamin, too, became a physician and practised in Brookfield, while Anna, daughter of Dr. Gott, married Dr. Samuel Brigham, a physician of Marlboro, and her son, Samuel Brigham, p actised medicine in Boylston. Medicine certainly ran in the family.

Returning to Dr. Gott, on January 8, 1733–34, a young man named Hollister Baker, about sixteen years old, was apprenticed to him, till he should come of age, "to learn his art, trade or mystery." Baker's father had disappeared and his guardian apprenticed him to Dr. Gott, in the manner of that time, to be made a doctor. Things moved fast in those days. Dr. Gott, only twenty-eight years old, was married, with three children — and more coming; already one student, a graduate of Harvard, had passed through his tuition and gone out into the world, and another lad had entered his office under a five years' apprenticeship. Baker's original indenture lies before me and is worth preserving, as a sample of the ways of medical education in 1734. It runs as follows:

This Indenture Witnesseth, That Hollister Baker a minor aged about sixteen son of Mr. Eben^{r} Baker late of Marlborough in the County of Middlesex Gent. Deceased of his own free Will and Accord, and with the Consent of Benj^{a} Wood of Marlborough in ye County aforesaid his Guardian doth Put and Bind himself to be an Apprentice unto Benj^{a} Gott of Marlboro in ye County aforesaid Physcician to learn his Art, Trade or Mystery, and with him the said Benj^{a} Gott after the manner of an Apprentice, to Dwell and Serve from the Day of the Date hereof,

[1] New England Historical and Genealogical Register, lvi. 341–344.

for and during the full and just Term of five Years and four months next ensuing, and fully to be Compleat and Ended. During all which said Term, the said Apprentice his said Master and Mistress honestly and faithfully shall Serve, so long as his Master lives of said Term,[1] their Secrets keep Close their lawful and reasonable Commands every where gladly Do and Perform; Damage to his said Master and Mistress he shall not wilfully Do, his Masters Goods he shall not Waste, Embezel, Purloine or Lend unto others, nor suffer the same to be wasted or purloined; but to his power shall forthwith Discover, and make Known the same unto his said Master or Mistress. Taverns nor Alehouses he shall not frequent; at Cards, Dice, or any other unlawful Game he shall not Play; Fornication he shall not Commit, nor Matrimony Contract with any Person, during said Term: From his Masters Service he shall not at any time unlawfully Absent himself But in all things as a good, honest and faithful Servant and Apprentice, shall bear and behave himself towards his said Master ~~and Mistress~~ during the full Term of five Years and four months Commencing as aforesaid.

AND THE SAID Benj[a] Gott for himself Doth Covenant Promise, Grant and Agree unto, and with him said Apprentice in Manner and Form following, THAT IS TO SAY, That he will teach the said Apprentice, or cause him to be Taught by the best Ways and Means that he may or can, the Trade, Art or Mystery of a Physcician according to his own best skil and judgm't (if said Apprentice be capable to learn) and will Find and Provide for and unto said Apprentice, good and sufficient meat Drink washing and lodging During said Term both in sickness and in health — his Mother all said Term finding said apprentice all his Cloathing of all sorts fitting for an Apprentice during said Term; and at the End of said Term, to dismiss said Apprentice with Good skill in arithmetick Lattin and also in the Greek through ye Greek Grammer.

IN TESTIMONY WHEREOF, The said Parties to these present Indentures have interchangeably set their Hands and Seals, the Eighth Day of January — In the seventh Year of the Reign of Our Sovereign Lord George ye second by the Grace of GOD, ~~King~~ of Great Britain, France and Ireland; And in the Year of Our LORD, One Thousand Seven Hundred and thirty three four —

Signed, Sealed and Delivered
in Presence of
JOHN MEAD
ELISABETH WOODS

HOLLISTER BAKER
BENJ[A] WOOD
BENJ[A] GOTT

Seals

[1] The words "so long as his Master lives of said Term" are interlined.

[*Endorsement*]

MARLBOROUGH June 15 1734

Memorandum whereas I the subscriber Father to the said Holister Baker within mentioned being absent for about two years whereupon a credible Report was abroad of my Death &c. upon the said Report although false the said minor was Taken Care of as within written unto the said within written Indenture I consent and am well satisfied and Contented that the same be fullfilled by All parties as aforesaid In witness thereof I here set my hand and seal the Day and Year first above written.

In Presence of
BENJ^A^ WOOD
JOHN MCCLEAVE

EBEN^R^ BAKER

Seal

Baker's father, it will be noticed, turned up before the close of the indenture and consented to its terms. What became of Hollister Baker I have been unable to ascertain.[1]

Returning to the instrument, Baker was bound with Dr. Gott "to dwell and serve." He agrees "his master and mistress honestly and faithfully to serve," not his master alone, but his mistress too. "Their reasonable commands he will everywhere gladly do and perform, and in all things as a good, honest and faithful servant and apprentice will bear and behave himself."

In short, his mother was to furnish his clothes and Dr. Gott his board and lodging and medical tuition, and in return he was to work his passage to his profession by serving the Doctor and Mrs. Gott for five years and four months, doing their chores, household and professional. Doctor Gott had served Dr. Wallis in the same way, and it was the custom of the day. There was no other method for a boy of ordinary means to enter the profession. The first medical school on the continent, that of Philadelphia, was not founded till 1765,[2] and even then a boy was required to pass one year in a doctor's office as an apprentice.

How I should like to see a letter from Baker describing his life.

[1] Presumably he was the "[C?] ollister Baker" who was baptized on March 1, 1720 (Vital Records of Marlborough, p. 15).

[2] The Philadelphia Hospital, the first in this country, was established in 1751. See Harrington, Harvard Medical School, i. 30, 31; Scharf and Westcott, History of Philadelphia, ii. 1584, 1588.

I imagine Dr. Gott lived in a modest house in the village with his office in one of the front rooms, where he kept his instruments — what few he had — his little library and some store of medicines, for there could hardly have been a pharmacy in the small town. So he would have to keep on hand some stock of things he most needed, such as opium, antimony, Peruvian bark, mercury, nitre, sulphur, ipecac, and probably some collection of the native remedies in general use, such as elecampane, elder, yellow dock, slippery elm, anise, saffron, snake-root, and the rest, and among these emblems of his future calling, Baker very likely passed a good share of his time.

He would come down from his plain quarters in the attic early in the morning and start the fire while Mrs. Gott attended to the children, then he would go out and look after the Doctor's horse. Before breakfast would come family prayers, when, according to tradition, the Doctor used to read from his Latin Bible. After breakfast, he would saddle the Doctor's horse and bring him round to the front door, when his master would throw the saddle bags over his back, stuffed with such medicines or instruments as the morning's work required, and ride away to his patients. Then perhaps Hollister would sit down to his "arithmetick, Lattin and Greek grammer," possibly dipping into some of the medical books which adorned the Doctor's shelves.

After a midday dinner, perhaps the Doctor would take him to visit some patient in the village or send him on the old mare with remedies to some distant invalid, whom his master was unable to attend in person. And when the day's work was done, the Doctor would look after the boy's studies and impart to him some knowledge of that "art, trade and mystery," which the boy was anxious to grasp. If the Doctor was kind and his mistress gentle, the lad's life might be very pleasant and his father's confirmation of the indenture seems to imply it was so. I wonder what were his relations to the boys and girls of the village. Of course, he met them at church; did he belong to the singing-school? Did they go out together huckleberrying; did he sometimes tempt the wary trout from his hole; or fish through a hole in the ice for the impulsive pickerel?

What a contrast the life of this lonely boy bears to the medical student of to-day, plunged in the whirl of city life, surrounded by the activities of a great class, enjoying the mysteries and sociabilities of a Greek letter fraternity, working in a richly endowed laboratory,

under the guidance of an army of distinguished scientists, and all this housed in a marble palace, such as poor Baker never dreamed of. It is a far cry from all this splendor of modern education to that solitary boy serving his master and mistress under a five-year indenture for his board, lodging, and tuition. But the old way had its offsets, for it brought him very close to his master's care and attention, and if the Doctor was a kind and sympathetic teacher, he could do wonders to guide and stimulate the struggling pupil.

Soon after the close of Baker's indenture, Mrs. Gott died, in 1740, leaving six young children. The Doctor married again, but his second wife died in 1745, leaving another infant on his hands. His own career was drawing to a close, and in 1751 he passed away in the prime of life, being only forty-five years old.

He died intestate, but the inventory of his administrators shows a handsome estate:

Personal property	£1445
Real estate at home	2060
" " " Housatonnuk	960
Book debts due	2071–9

The "Book debts" I fear were hopeless, but his library appears not to be included in the above inventory. Its pecuniary value was not large, but the remarkable number of historical and classical books in this collection — Horace, Virgil, Ovid, Cicero, and others — indicates a literary culture unusual in those days.

He left a host of mourning friends, some of whom testified to their sorrow by the following quaint obituary notice, published in the Boston News-Letter of August 1, 1751:

MARLBOROUGH, July 27. 1751

On the 25th deceased, and this Day was decently interr'd, Dr. Benjamin Gott, a learned and useful Physician and Surgeon: The Loss of this Gentleman is the more bewail'd in these Parts, as he was not only a Lover of Learning and learned Men, and very hospitable and generous; but as he was peculiarly faithful to his Patients, moderate in his Demands, and charitable to the Poor; a Character very imitable by all in the Faculty; and was taken off in the very Meridian of Life, being but in the 46th Year of his Age.

This memorial has about it the flavor of genuine feeling. Marlboro had indeed lost a faithful citizen and a good man.

3 2044 048 999 981

3 2044 048 999 981